

4-2013

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## Recommended Citation

Munson, Elizabeth and Grundmanis, Kristina, "Emotional Expression in First Generation Students" (2013). *Undergraduate Research Symposium 2013*. Book 7.

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# EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION IN FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS

## KRISTINA GRUNDMANIS AND ELIZABETH MUNSON

### JEFFREY RATLIFF-CRAIN (FACULTY ADVISOR)

## INTRODUCTION

A time of great change and great stress begins when one enters college. This is especially true for first-generation college students (FGS)--students whose parent/guardian did not graduate from college (Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011). FGS are at a higher risk for not completing college in four years (e.g. Mehta, et al., 2011), which may be related to everyday stress. The present study looks at whether or not emotional expression could be used as a tool to deal with daily stress for these individuals.

Emotional expression (i.e. expressive writing) is a coping mechanism based on the disclosure of an emotional experience (Pennebaker, 1997). For more details on the model of emotional expression see Pennebaker et al. (1990). While emotional writing in a short span (3-5 days) has shown a positive effect on participants (e.g. Pennebaker & Susman, 1988), less is known about the effects of such writing over an extended period of time. If shown to be effective, emotional expression would provide an efficient solution to dealing with stress in the long run.

More recently, there has been growing concern over the applicability of Pennebaker's model of expressive writing (Frattaroli, 2006), such that emotional expressive writing may be more effective when reflecting on specific traumas rather than overall, or general, anxiety. By looking at general anxiety, the current study provides a further test of the applicability of this paradigm for this high risk group.

The present study applied emotional expression as a coping mechanism for FGS at the University of Minnesota Morris (UMM). We hypothesized that expressive writing would 1. Produce anxiety relief in comparison to those writing about a superficial topic and 2. That those writing once a week for four weeks would experience the positive results of that relief for a longer time than those that only attend one writing session.

## METHODS

This study was a 2 (emotional writing vs. distracted writing) x 2 (one session vs. four sessions) x 3 (baseline, post-intervention, follow-up) mixed factorial model.

- Each writing session lasted 20 minutes (as described in Pennebaker et al., 1990).

- There were four conditions to which participants could have been randomly assigned:

- Condition one: one twenty-minute session; anxiety-inducing topic.
- Condition two: one twenty-minute session; non-anxiety-inducing topic.
- Condition three: four twenty-minute sessions over four weeks; anxiety-inducing topic.
- Condition four: four twenty-minute sessions over four weeks; non-anxiety-inducing topic.

- Anxiety measures were given at initial meeting (baseline), one week post-intervention, and five weeks post-intervention (follow-up). Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI), State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI) were used to collect levels of anxiety.

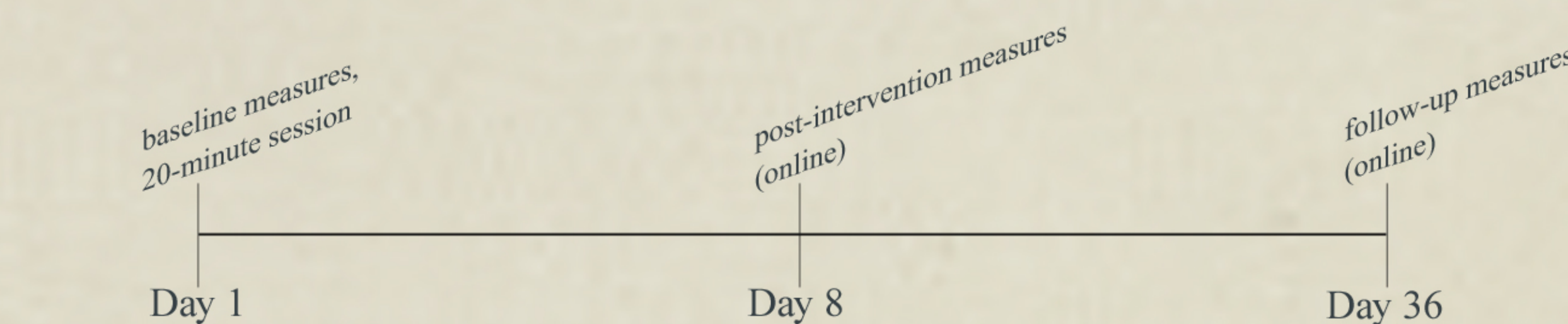
- Other measures: basic demographic and social support questionnaires were also collected.

## ABSTRACT

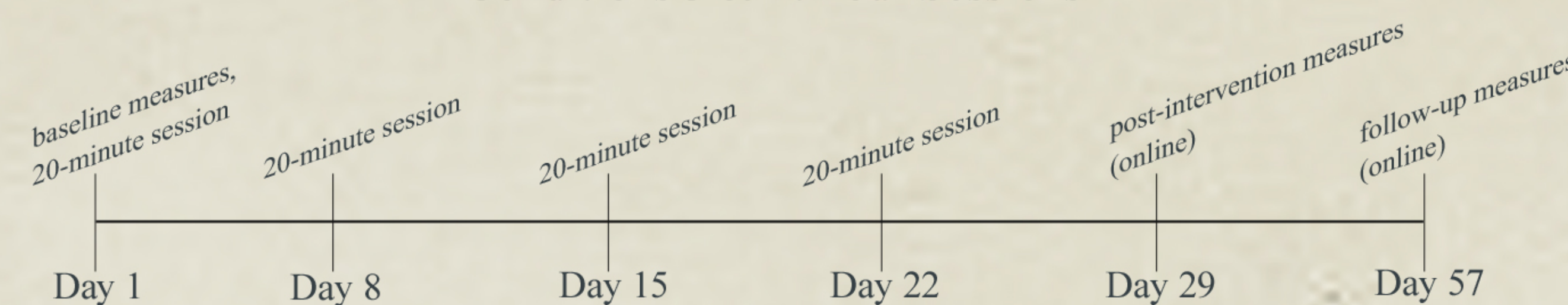
Research suggests emotional expression is a successful tool for reducing stress in the short term (Pennebaker et al., 1990). The current study applied this approach to first generation college students (FGS). We hypothesized that emotional expression would reduce stress in FGS, and that the stress reduction would last longer in association with the number of emotional expression writing sessions. Although no group in the study showed a significant decrease in stress over the semester, having greater levels of social support was associated with lower anxiety.

## DESIGN & TIMELINE

Conditions 1 & 2: One Session



Conditions 3 & 4: Four Sessions



## RESULTS

We hypothesized that expressive writing will 1. Produce anxiety relief in comparison to those writing about a superficial topic, and 2. That those writing once a week for four weeks will experience the positive results of that relief for a longer time than those that only attend one writing session. However, neither hypothesis was supported by the data.

- Across all conditions, there was a general trend of anxiety reduction, though not significantly so. Participants reported moderate anxiety at baseline (M = 18.83, SD = 10.17), mild anxiety at post-intervention (M = 12.75, SD = 9.92), and follow-up (M = 13.50, SD = 9.03),  $F(1,19) = 6.98$ ,  $p = .016$ .

- Participants in the emotional expression writing conditions (1 and 3) reported moderate anxiety at baseline (M = 19.38, SD = 11.16), mild anxiety at post-intervention (M = 15.79, SD = 9.36), and mild anxiety at follow-up (M = 14.86, SD = 9.28). Although there was a small reduction in reported anxiety, the results were not significant.

- Participants in the distractive writing conditions (2 and 4), experienced a non-significant initial decrease in anxiety, however no anxiety changes were statistically significant: baseline (M = 18.18, SD = 9.36), post-intervention (M = 8.50, SD = 6.52), follow-up (M = 11.60, SD = 8.77).

There was a minimal relationship between number of sources of support and stress reduction. For participants with some form of familial support, the mean BAI anxiety score at across all sessions (M = 11.10, SE = 2.54) was lower, but not significantly so, compared to those without support (M = 17.59, SE = 2.23),  $F(1,19) = 3.69$ ,  $p = .07$ .

## DISCUSSION

The present study provided a further test of the applicability of Pennebaker's paradigm, looking at general anxiety in a high risk group. While students did not experience increases in stress, there was no significant decrease in either the short term or long term for those receiving the intervention. This suggests that other interventions may be more useful for decreasing stress. In combination with similar studies, results suggest that this type of intervention may not be useful for all populations.

This study encountered many limitations. While our sample size was small, it was representative of the target population. Additionally, through random assignment we ended up with a disproportionate number of individuals with high trait stress in the emotional expression conditions. Individuals displaying high trait stress may be less affected by any generalized intervention. The length of the study (spanning two semesters) makes it unclear if there was any effect on data in relation to the time of year the participation occurred.

## CONCLUSION

Results seem to indicate that while there is no real harm in emotional expression, other coping mechanisms may produce a more significant effect. The writing intervention within its own right did not seem to decrease stress levels. Although there were trends in decreased stress, results were not significantly different across conditions, suggesting there was no strong impact on anxiety based on type of writing or duration.

While emotional expressive writing may work under certain conditions (such as targeting specific trauma), it does not appear to be useful in more generalized situations. This suggests that use of emotional expression with FGS, whose sources of anxiety may vary, is not an ideal intervention.

There was a minimal relationship between the number of sources of social support and a reduced stress level. This may indicate that simply having sources of support (with or without regular contact), may be more advantageous to the reduction of stress than writing about the same stressors. This seems to support the idea that there may be many other moderators to reducing general anxiety, beyond emotional expression.

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This research was funded by the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program at the University of Minnesota, Morris. Special thanks to the UMM Psychology Discipline and our advisor Jeffrey Ratliff-Crain.

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